

Back up in Mann Gulch it's about 5:40 PM. Dodge and Harrison, after returning to the cargo area, finally head down the north side of the gulch and catch up with the rest of the crew strung out in a single file, still heading for the river. When Dodge catches up with the crew he takes the lead and places Hellman at the rear.

It's important to recognize that up to this point there's been no sense of urgency about this fire. The men have calmly eaten dinner and are walking at a normal pace as they head for the safety of the river. As they walk down the gulch jumper David Navon even stops long enough to take a snapshot of the fire. There's no great hurry, certainly no panic.

At about 5:45 PM Wag Dodge at the head of the column of men starts up a small finger ridge which up to this point obscures his view to the river. When he reaches the top of this ridge he immediately sees the fire has somehow jumped from the south side of the gulch and is now burning furiously below them on the north side of the gulch. Worse still, the fire is now burning up-hill to the north and west of where he's standing. Their escape route to the river is now cut off.

Dodge quickly moves to the end of the line of men and sends Hellman to what was formerly the head of the line. The line of men reverses its route of travel with Dodge in the lead and they begin to obliquely head for the ridgeline in a northwesterly direction, directly away from the direction the fire is now travelling on the north side of Mann Gulch.

They proceed in this direction for several minutes, but the going is tough. They're headed up-slope, the slope is steep, the footing is treacherous. They've picked their way across three rock fields, but they're still several hundred yards shy of the ridgetop. The fire is steadily advancing toward them and at this point it's only 150 to 200 yards behind them and gaining fast.

It's 5:53 PM and Dodge realizes that at the rate they're moving up the slope they're not going to make it. He turns to his crew and says, "Throw everything away that's heavy". The men drop their shovels, their pulaskis, the two crosscut saws they're carrying, and other gear. But to some of the crew members Dodge's order isn't clear. Harrison retains his heavy smokechaser pack and his pulaski. Diettert keeps both his shovel and his pulaski until Walt Rumsey takes the shovel and tosses it down the hill. The line of men continues to struggle diagonally up the slope for another two minutes, but the pitch of the hillside approaches 76% here and the line of men stretches out and they find themselves going more across the hillside and not up toward the ridgeline.

At 5:55 PM, as the line of men breaks out of a finger of big ponderosa pine trees and into a grassy opening on the steep hillside, Dodge---without a word to anyone---pauses, knells down and with a match from a book of paper matches sets fire to the grass in front of him. The fire springs up in the dry grass and in a matter of seconds starts burning directly up the hill. Dodge's fire burns off no more than a ten foot by ten foot square area when he runs up the right side, leaps over the flames and into the freshly blackened area. To those nearest him he yells, "Up this way!" Sallee, Rumsey and Diettert, who are in the line just behind Dodge don't understand Dodge's order to get into the blackened and burned area. They think Dodge intends for his fire to be some sort of buffer between them and the main fire, which is rapidly closing in on them, and they run around the right side of his still burning escape fire and head directly up the slope and for the ridgetop. Bill Hellman, who was posted at the back of the crew when they reversed their direction of travel a few minutes ago, is now up near the head of the line. When he hears Dodge's "Up this way", Hellman says, "To hell with that, I'm getting out of here" and he starts for the ridgeline on the left flank of Dodge's fire.

The rest of the crew either doesn't hear Dodge's instructions or they hear him, but they don't understand he wants them to join him in the safety of the blackened area. It's also possible that because they knew Hellman they trusted his judgement more than Dodge's so they simply follow his lead and seek their own escape route. In any event, they bolt and continues on a path that takes them on the diagonal across the slope. But the fire is moving at 600 to 700 feet per minute now and the men are quickly caught in a blast of super-heated air and dropped to the hillside.

Within a minute of two the fire catches the crew at 5:56 or 5:57 PM. Jim Harrison's wrist watch stops at 5:56.

Wag Dodge after jumping into his escape fire and trying unsuccessfully to get the crew to join him, finally flattens himself on the hillside as the flaming wall of fire sweeps over him. Three times in the passing of the flaming front he is lifted up off the ground by hot, swirling winds.

Bob Sallee, Walt Rumsey and Eldon Diettert run directly up the slope along the right side of Dodge's escape fire and head for the ridgetop which is only 100 yards or so up the slope. But as they reach the ridgetop, nearly exhausted now, they run smack into a nearly vertical wall of rock running along the top of the ridge. Frantically, Sallee and Rumsey search for an opening. Diettert upon hitting the wall turns to the right trying to find an opening. Sallee and Rumsey finally find an opening amidst the smoke and near panic, and they squeeze through to the other side. Once through the opening they spot a long narrow patch of rocks just off the ridge and down the slope. They scramble to safety in the bottom of the rocks but minutes later are chased to the top of the rock slope as a finger of the fire sweeps over the ridgetop. And then, before they've caught their breaths, yet another finger of fire snakes over the ridgetop and chases them back down to the bottom of their island of safety. Diettert, who had turned right when he hit the wall is trapped by the fire before he's run 200 feet across the slope.

Bill Hellman, who had tried to run up the left side of Dodge's fire, gets to the ridgetop and then he's hit by the fire. Though severely burned he managed to make it through the rock wall and stumbles down the other side of the slope for 200 yards before he stops running.

Back on the Mann Gulch side of the ridge it's 6:10 PM before Dodge can leave his escape fire. He immediately wonders about his crew and begins to call out through the thick smoke and noise of burning material. After about five minutes he hears a weak cry from below him and to the left. He picks his way through the burning trees and stumps and at 6:15 PM finds Joe Sylvia. Sylvia is horribly burned, but he's still conscious and alert. Dodge moves Sylvia to the safety of a large boulder--rocks and burning logs continue to roll down the steep hillside all around them---retrieves Sylvia's canteen and removes his boots. At about 6:30 PM Dodge leaves Sylvia alone on the hillside and heads up to the ridgetop to find the rest of his crew.

Meanwhile, the fire has swept on past Sallee and Rumsey and by 6:15 PM they leave their rock pile and begin searching for the others. At 6:20 PM they discover Bill Hellman just down-slope from them and a little off to the west. Like Sylvia, Hellman is badly burned. They give him a drink of water and what comfort they can offer.

About this time Dodge comes over the ridge and comes down to where Hellman is propped up against a boulder. Dodge tells Sallee and Rumsey that Joe Sylvia is badly burned over in Mann Gulch. Dodge then tells seventeen year old Walt Rumsey to stay with Hellman and that he and Sallee are going to head